

WISE PRAYING

PROVERBS 30:7-9

Civil war general and former United States President, Ulysses S. Grant was fighting the final battle of his life – this time with cancer. An old colleague, a General Howard, came to visit Grant. For awhile they discussed battles from the Civil War they'd both been involved in. Suddenly, Grant interrupted their discussion with these words, "Howard, tell me what you know about prayer." Facing death and eternity, Grant's interests changed dramatically. Past achievements meant little. Knowing the comfort and assurance of a relationship with God as his Father meant everything.

We're in the midst of a series of message on the Old Testament book of Proverbs. It's called "How to Live Wisely and Well." Proverbs doesn't have a lot of verses about prayer per se, but it does have a lot to say about relationships. Prayer is about your relationship with God – not a technique, not a ritual and not just a spiritual discipline. Proverbs makes a vital connection between wise praying and good relationships. It's as if Solomon, who is considered the man who gathered most of these sayings together in their present form, implies the following: "Now, God is a Person. His great desire is that you discover a wonderful relationship with Him. Prayer is the primary way you relate to God. Prayer is about relationship not technique. What makes for good relationships can be applied to prayer. When you have a good relationship with God, you will have a good prayer life. By the same token, the quality of your prayer life will affect the quality of your relationship with the Lord. They go hand in hand."

Are you satisfied with your prayer life? I'm not. I've read books on prayer. I've tried different techniques. If you're dissatisfied with your prayer life, it's an indicator that you need to grow somehow in your relationship with the living God. What makes for a good relationship with God? If you can answer that question – more importantly, if you can enter into that kind of relationship - you will discover wise, effective praying. So here's the first mark of a good relationship:

AUTHENTICITY

It's impossible to have a good relationship with another person if there's not authenticity with him or her. Authenticity means being honest and genuine. Authenticity is absolutely necessary in a good marriage relationship. Authenticity is imperative in a good parent – child relationship. Deep friendships that stand the test of time depend on a willingness of both people to be real. Solomon applies that truth over and over again in Proverbs when it comes to all human relationships. Authenticity is a must. He also applies it to our relationship with God. God is always and forever authentic. In fact, it's impossible for God to be inauthentic. He's always genuine, honest and real. And therein is the problem! That's not true of us, is it? You're a sinful person. So am I. We have a natural bent towards being inauthentic. Honesty all the time is threatening. Being genuine 24/7 seems impossible. We're not at all sure God or anybody else will

like the real person, so we wear masks and put on disguises. Frankly, our default mode is deception – even self-deception – not authenticity.

A man by the name of Agur – not Solomon, actually – addresses this issue of authenticity in Proverbs. “God, I'm asking for two things before I die; don't refuse me — Banish lies from my lips and liars from my presence....” (Proverbs 30:7-8a MSG) Agur knew how prone he was to self-deception and a lack of authenticity or being genuine. If you read between the lines of this prayer – and it is a prayer – Agur is saying, “Lord, I'm not very good at being real, but I want to be real. I want to be genuine, honest and authentic. I realize above all else that the health of our relationship, Lord, depends on my willingness to be honest before You. Lord, save me from all kinds of deception especially self-deception.”

I believe there are at least two areas where we struggle to be honest with God. The first area is when you're disappointed with God. Many of us here today are disappointed with God. God has not met your expectations. God has not solved a problem you wanted solved. God has not made life fit into your plans and dreams. Now the issue isn't whether your feelings of disappointment are legitimate or warranted. The issue is whether you are authentic with God about your disappointment with Him.

It's silly, but sometimes we can act as if we're afraid to hurt God's feelings. And so it's easy to cover up your real feelings with flowery, spiritual language or pious talk. Your prayers then become unreal. The fact is that God is big enough to handle your disappointment with Him. God is just fine with a prayer that goes something like this, “Lord, to be very honest, I feel crummy about my life today and I don't know what You're doing about it if anything. I'm disappointed in You, God, because it seems like You could care less.” That sounds blasphemous! That sounds like a lack of faith! Well, I would simply remind you that David prayed like that often and many of those prayers are found in the Bible. It's called the Psalms. God loves and responds to authenticity even when it involves some very negative feelings directed towards Him. He can deal with it. So be real in your relationship with God and be real in your prayers to Him. If life stinks, tell Him life stinks. The more real you are with Him, the more the Holy Spirit can remind you that God loves you despite life's ups and downs. God accepts your disappointment with Him and begins to probe your heart gently. The result of all that is relationship. Raw – yes, at times – but real.

Here's a second area where we struggle to be honest with God: when you have sinned against God. The sad fact is that you will commit sins even after deciding to follow Jesus. But only some will authentically confess and forsake those sins. The hardest words for some people to say are these: “I'm so sorry and with God's help I will never do that again.” One key to any good human relationship is the ability to admit when you've done something wrong. Have you ever known someone who simply couldn't admit he'd blown it? Or, if she did apologize, it was always qualified in some way. “I'm terribly sorry about what happened,

but...” Then a reason was provided which nullified the need for any apology! It’s hard to maintain a relationship with someone like that, because he or she lacks authenticity.

The same relationship principle is true with God. “If you don't confess your sins, you will be a failure. But God will be merciful if you confess your sins and give them up.” (Proverbs 28:13 CEV) The opposite of confessing your sins is pretending that you didn’t really sin at all or that what you did wasn’t really all that bad. You might be able to conceal sin from mere human beings, but not God. If you try to conceal sin from Him, you will fail spiritually and in every other way.

The very first step towards a good relationship with God is being able to admit your sin and turn away from it. God never turns away from people who admit their sin, but He always turns away from those who want to defend it. If confessing your sin is important to beginning a relationship with the Lord, the ability to confess is just as important to maintaining that relationship. Years ago, I had a Bible teacher who taught me the importance of what he called keeping “short accounts” with God. He said, “Rick, when you commit a sin, go to the Lord as quickly as you can and sincerely ask His forgiveness. Don’t hold on to it. Keep short accounts with the Lord.” There’s a cartoon strip called *Calvin and Hobbes*. In one cartoon, Calvin says to Hobbes, “I feel bad that I called Susie names and hurt her feelings. I’m sorry I did that.” “Maybe you should apologize to her,” Hobbes suggests. Calvin ponders this advice for a moment and then replies, “I keep hoping there’s a less obvious solution.” When you want to start a relationship with God, maintain a relationship with God or restore a relationship with God, you need to remember that He has a liking for the obvious solution.

Now, remember that authenticity in this area means not only confession of sin but forsaking it. “... But God will be merciful if you confess your sins and give them up.” (Proverbs 28:13 CEV) Perhaps you’ve known someone who’s hurt you repeatedly. He or she is quick to apologize, but he or she also keeps up the hurtful behavior. After awhile, you have a right to question that person’s authenticity. Well, so does God! Authenticity with God demands not only confessing your sin but also forsaking it.

Let me add this thought here. I believe the Bible teaches that an authentic follower of Jesus cannot lose his or her salvation. But I also believe that an authentic Christian can lose any vital, spiritual connection with God for days, months and even years because of unconfessed or unforsaken sin. David might be the best example. After his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and getting her husband, Uriah, killed, he somehow denied or rationalized his awful actions to himself. This continued for a year before God sent the prophet, Nathan, to confront David. Only when David confessed his sin and gave it up was his connection to God restored. David wrote about this spiritual reality. “When I refused to confess my sin, my body wasted away, and I groaned all day long. Day and night your hand of discipline was heavy on me. My strength evaporated

like water in the summer heat. Finally, I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide my guilt. I said to myself, 'I will confess my rebellion to the LORD.' And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone." (Psalm 32:3-5 NLT) That's an authentic relationship. That's also authentic prayer. Here's a second mark of a good relationship:

INTEGRITY

Every good relationship with another human being depends on integrity. Nothing causes more pain to a relationship or ends a relationship more quickly than disloyalty, betrayal or some lapse of integrity. Integrity is not perfection. Few people expect or demand perfection out of their relationships, but everyone wants integrity. Integrity simply means you are dependable, you act towards others honestly and you can be trusted.

Since God is a Person with whom you can have a relationship, integrity matters here just as much as with any other relationship. Now, you already know God is absolutely trustworthy, dependable, truthful and upright. He can only ever relate to you with integrity. Again, the problem is with you and me! That's where the lack of integrity shows up every time. "The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but he delights in the prayers of the upright.... The LORD is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayers of the righteous.... God detests the prayers of a person who ignores the law." (Proverbs 15:8; 15:29; 28:9 NLT)

The "wicked" are people who reveal their true heart attitude by their lifestyle and attitudes. They may be nice enough on the exterior, but on the interior they have no real use for God. There's no desire for Him in their hearts. There's no wanting to obey Him in their attitudes and lifestyle. They only think of God when they get into trouble. Do you know people who pray only when life gets hard? When life is going fine, it's apparently OK to ignore God completely. Isn't it amazing how many people could care less about God's expectations or standards, but who still feel God ought to listen to their prayers when they get into trouble? Prayer becomes an effort to use God. That's why according to those verses the Lord gets nauseated and disgusted by their prayers. God knows He's not being approached as an object of love or devotion, but instead as just someone who will give them what they want in the way they want it. We're told here that God doesn't hear their prayers! Oh, He knows what they're saying all right. What is meant is that God just ignores their prayers. They're useless, irrelevant prayers. They mean nothing to Him. Since there is no integrity in their relationship with God, there is no integrity to their prayers.

It's true, those words "upright" and "righteous" in those verses sound intimidating when applied to you and me, don't they? It sounds like God expects you to be perfect. But I don't believe God has perfect people in mind here when he talks about the upright and the righteous. Remember that in Proverbs the great, fundamental, all-encompassing right approach to all life and living is to have "the

fear of the Lord.” That means that there is a growing desire at the core of your being for God Himself and, also, wanting to obey Him in your attitudes and actions. You really do want to please Him. God – more than anyone else – surely knows that learning to fear the Lord is a spiritual journey that takes time. It’s not some once and done experience. It’s these people – those who sincerely want God and want to obey Him– whose prayers delight God.

Tim Schutt is a NASCAR crew chief. When he was a relatively new follower of Jesus, his integrity was tested. He was being tempted to add an illegal piece of equipment to the No. 20 car of Mike McLaughlin. It was a small adjustment that could make a big difference. Tim knew that most NASCAR teams conclude that if you can get away with something illegal, somehow it’s not cheating. After Mike McLaughlin’s practice run, Tim got under the car to install this illegal piece of equipment. Half way through, a verse he’d just learned flashed into his mind: “Seek first the Kingdom of God.” It kept flashing in red in front of him. Tim changed his mind and said to himself, “I’m leaving this up to you, God.” He didn’t put the piece on the car. McLaughlin won the race. It was Talladega, one of the biggest races of 2001. The first thing that came to Tim’s mind was that verse. He said, “God wanted to show himself to me.” This side of heaven you can’t have a perfect relationship with God, but you can have one that’s marked by integrity. And a relationship with God that has integrity – wanting to please Him, fearing Him, being open to spiritual transformation - leads to prayers that have integrity. Here’s a third mark of a good relationship.

INTIMACY

The deepest human relationships in this life are marked by intimacy – a deep, trustful, vulnerable enjoyment of another person. You want to be with that person. You know what that person likes and dislikes. You want to please that person. You are happiest and feel most fulfilled when you’re with that person. There’s chemistry and connection. When you enjoy intimacy with God, it will be reflected in your prayer life.

Now, here’s a truth that boggles the mind. God really does enjoy you if you are His child. He wants to be with you – today, tomorrow and forever. His ultimate plans and purposes for you are wonderful beyond description. The God of the universe desires an intimate relationship with the likes of you and me despite how boring, limited, ignorant and sinful we are. The evidence of His love is captured forever in the symbol of cross. If there’s ever a question about God’s love, all you have to do is look at the cross to be reminded of God’s desire for an intimate, eternal relationship with you. No, the only unanswered question is this one: do you really want God? Do you enjoy God? Do you know what pleases God? Do you even want to please Him? Are you happy and fulfilled in His presence? Is there a chemistry and connection with the Lord that you would find unbearable if it was lost?

Let me offer two simple definitions of intimacy with God. It is, first of all, wanting God in all things. You get a picture of that attitude in the latter part of Agur's prayer that we looked at earlier: "...Give me enough food to live on, neither too much nor too little. If I'm too full, I might get independent, saying, "God? Who needs him?" If I'm poor, I might steal and dishonor the name of my God." (Proverbs 30:8b-9 MSG) Can you sense Agur's heart? If you expanded his prayer it might sound like this: "Lord, I don't want to be rich or poor. If I'm too poor, I'll become a burden to other people. Or I might get so desperate that I'll do something that displeases you like stealing. On the other hand, Lord, I don't want to be too rich either. I've seen what money and things can do to people. They forget what's truly valuable like a relationship with You. They begin to live as if You don't matter. Lord, I can't image either forgetting You or displeasing You. I can't imagine trying to live my life without You." Do you hear the intimacy in Agur's prayer? Above all he wanted God in all things.

When you want God in all things, you will – secondly – bring Him into every area of your life. "Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and your plans will succeed." (Proverbs 16:3 NIV) Wise praying opens up every nook, every cranny, every closet and every corner of your life and exposes it fully to God. This is when living with God and experiencing prayer almost become like breathing. Because He is already in every part of your life, everything gets committed to Him almost without conscious thought or effort. Prayer becomes a way of life and a way of being in God's presence. That's relationship. That's intimacy. That's wise praying.